



University of Iowa

---

International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work

---

9-18-2002

[untitled]

Hugo Chaparro Valderrama

Panel: Why I Write

---

**Rights**

Copyright © 2002 Hugo Chaparro

**Recommended Citation**

Chaparro Valderrama, Hugo, "[untitled]" (2002). *International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work*. 585.

[https://ir.uiowa.edu/iwp\\_archive/585](https://ir.uiowa.edu/iwp_archive/585)

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](https://ir.uiowa.edu). For more information please contact: [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

## Hugo Chaparro Valderrama

I swear to tell the truth and nothing but the truth —at least in the first paragraph...

Some years ago, a German professor visited Colombia in order to compile a literary anthology. When he called, the professor asked me if I had a couple of short-stories that would fit into the on the worst Colombian cliché that we have had to bear: violence. When I answered his anthology. I replied that I had a love story about two actresses of silent film in the 1950s Mexico, and another story that pretended to be a tribute to Stevenson's Treasure Island. After the pause of silence transmitted by the telephone, the professor stated that he needed typical Colombian stories about the violence of the country. A love story in the 1950s Mexico or an adventure about Stevenson did not have the local color or exoticism that would appeal, in his opinion, to the European reader. Shortly afterwards I heard that, besides his obsession for reading Colombian literary fiction not as it had been written but as his prejudices wanted it to be, the German professor also suffered from a weird obsession for dogs. As some of the authors who later asked to be excluded from the volume told me, if their story did not have a dog, he suggested adding one or, in case the story did have a dog, he suggested giving the animal a central role in the plot. Perhaps the most shameful side of the whole anecdote was how the professor declared, after the corrections he suggested had been made by the writers who complied to his suggestions, that Colombian writers should be grateful to him as he had improved their style and the plot of the stories that he transformed according to his ideas.

The gap between First and Third World turns some readers into colonial spies in cultures they deem inferior, and echoes the clash between civilization and barbarism, as some sort of the way Indians talk in Westerns, that surrenders shamefully the literary legacy of a country, transforming it into some postcard designed for tourists. Fortunately, somebody once said:

“In poetry, there are no underdeveloped nations”.

However, prejudices play an important role in determining the most profitable theme, in terms of the publishing industry: writing about reality, as a straitjacket that allows the reader from a distant geography to look out at Third World exoticism.

The example of Nia Vardalos, a Greek actress, illustrates this problem. She played the central role in a comedy about the Greek world, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, that became the most important box-office hit last summer in the US. In her early days as an actress, a Hollywood agent suggested Mrs. Vardalos that she should change her name to the resonant Vardalez, trying to attract the Hispanic film audience, as it sounded more

Puertorican. Mrs. Vardalos asked then if being Greek reduced her chances of success. And she then made *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, with director Joel Zwick. The rest is the story of a low-budget movie that has sold millions of tickets.

Perhaps in Latin America, writers have written mostly both following and opposing the colonial literary tradition. In the 1960s, the members of the so-called Latin American Boom built on tradition and enriched it according to their views. Garcia Márquez wrote both following and opposing Faulkner: he assimilated his influences and enriched them with an approach that shaded Faulkner energy. Mexican author Carlos Fuentes has always been a devoted reader of English language fiction, and from that source he has drawn the material used for shaping the literary dreams that come true in his books. Octavio Paz, reader and translator of countless writers, discovered a novel approach for his literary work when he lived in India. And before them, Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges, father of us all, taught us that a reader should belong to the vast country of literary fiction, a country without nationalistic forces, without language borders or parochial simplification.

In Colombia today, writers try to find a style both following and opposing tradition and the prejudices that seem to recycle our common places in a sickly fashion. Our goal is to acknowledge the past and then to build on it in order to go on, further ahead, in an evolution departing from the past. While naivete and the lack of information about the country repeat words as cocaine, kidnappings or guerrilla, echoing in some way a newspaper slogan “if it bleeds it leads”, literary fiction and its inventions suggest a more intimate country, a more diverse land, with shades which are different from the ones shown by the pages of *The New York Times*, that relate us, Colombians, to death and tragedy.

Journalists ask me why I, being Colombian, write love stories while my country is sinking into a deep social crisis that leads to war. The answer is simple: precisely because in fiction one can face reality from perspectives different from those of sociological essay or political chronicle. The other question, as frequent as the previous one, inquires about my reasons for writing a first novel that takes place in an invented town, a second novel that takes place in Toronto, and a third one in Mexico, and for evoking in my poems ghosts as diverse as blues singer Robert Johnson, or writer Carson McCullers, who left a wise and imperturbable memory in this world, or a samurai who tells his life story when he is already dead.

Writing is not a matter of choosing one out of two main subjects: violence or love. It is a matter of writing about violence and also about love. It is not one thing or the other, it can be both, and also many other ghosts that incite in us the passion of writing about them. The writer must simply obey the hunch of his concerns, the responsibility to the

logic of the plot and to the development of his characters, and must never obey the criteria of academic circles that will then carry out a surgical dissection of his work.

Colombian writer Jaime Manrique Ardila, who has lived in New York for several years and writes in English, in his novel *Latin Moon in Manhattan*, tells the story of a Colombian homosexual who discovers love's intimacy through a friend who dies tragically of AIDS. This story is combined with some aspects of the national melodrama through a bunch of women, drawn from a Latino soap-opera, who live in Queens. "They don't know what to do with me", Manrique once said to me. "To Hispanics, I'm a North American writer, and for Americans, I'm a Latino writer. They don't agree". However, Manrique's books, essays and poetry present a novel approach to nationalism in immigration territory, where the place of birth is either weakened or radicalized.

Fortunately, before finishing these lines, I had the privilege of talking about all this with a clever friend, Bosnian writer Nihad Hasanovic. The uneasiness is shared: what readers expect of a writer from Nihad's country is the horrible common place of war. So we made a deal: Nihad will visit Colombia, while I go to Bosnia-Herzegovina. Perhaps then, the old commonplaces will make us react and invent new ones, and will make us write in a way where fiction is more important than the categories set by prejudices.